

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD WITT  
CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT  
for the  
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KSU Oral History Series, No. 75  
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Thursday, 21 August 2008  
Location: CETL House, Kennesaw State University

TS: Today I'm interviewing Leonard Witt who won the KSU Foundation Distinguished Service Award in 2008. Len, we start with everybody just asking them to talk about their background, where they grew up and where they went to school and things like that. So let's start with a little bit about yourself.

LW: Okay. Well, I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town. Most of my relatives on my mother's side were Polish and some coal miners mixed in there. My dad, he's actually from near here; he grew up in Talladega, Alabama. It's interesting that when we moved down here I got reintroduced to all the Witts. Do you want a little history of that? It's kind of interesting.

TS: Yes, sure.

LW: So my mother is Polish-Catholic . . .

TS: What's her name by the way, and his name?

LW: They're both dead, and her name was Stella Pearl Witt.

TS: Stella Pearl. Maiden name Pearl?

LW: No, it was Frankavitz. They spelled it so many different ways that it's hard for me to keep up with exactly how she was using it in her time. Most of the family go with Frankavitz now, but, originally, it was almost more like Franckewicz or Frankevicz. I have seen both ways, and I am sure there were other spellings too.

TS: And what is your father's name?

LW: Harry Witt.

TS: So it sounds like a little different ethnicity.

LW: It was a different ethnicity, especially in the time when they got married. Neither family was very happy about this.

TS: Okay, so she was Polish.

LW: She was Polish-Catholic and he's Russian-Jew.

TS: Okay. I thought he might have been redneck.

LW: No, no, the reason why he got down here is interesting. I found out a lot of this history because now that I'm here there are all these Witts around from Alabama and all, but Wolf Witt, his father's brother, I believe, moved down here first from Philadelphia and started a dry goods business. Then he invited brothers and cousins to come down and start their own business, but they all had to be far enough part that they weren't competing.

TS: Yes, yes. This is about as standard a practice as you can get

LW: Right. So given that, there are Witts that stretch from Birmingham, Alabama, and all the way up to Chattanooga.

TS: And all in the dry goods business.

LW: Not any more. They're in all different things. Bur originally.

TS: They all got here around the turn of the century, I guess.

LW: Yes, I think they did. My father was born in 1911. He was born in Talladega. My mom's side of the family, her mother was Polish, but born here, and her father was actually born in Poland. They were first generation immigrants, basically, and they spoke as much Polish as they did English, or maybe more.

TS: My wife's family is from Buffalo, and she's got cousins of Russian-Irish ethnicity whose last name is Uraskevich. The older generation pronounced it either u-ras'ke-vich or ur-es-kay'vich.

LW: Correct. They keep changing. So I always have to go and look at the spelling. I know the Frankavitz with "vitz," but that's sort of the Americanized version of it.

TS: Okay. So you were going to tell some stories about them.

LW: Yes, I can tell a couple of stories. My mom, first generation, grew up in the Depression era, and she had to quit school when she was thirteen to go work in the silk mills. Silk mills in Pennsylvania . . .

TS: I've never heard of silk mills in Pennsylvania.

LW: Yes, they used to have them. In fact, we were up not too long ago in Massachusetts, and we went to Lowell to look at some of the factories, and they had these. But it was really hard for her to leave school. I thought when my daughter was thirteen what it must have been like for her to be pulled out of school.

TS: Yes, it's incredible.

LW: Right. So she went there, but her sister, fortunately, got her a job at the Hotel Sterling selling newspapers and magazines behind the stand.

TS: Beginning of a journalism career for you.

LW: Well, there's a connection here that I kind of like, so now I get to tell it publicly. She self-educated herself, basically, by reading the *New York Times* every day and all of these different publications. So later my dad and she moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania, and that's where I really grew up is Allentown. It was economically a step up from that era in the 1950s. Allentown at that time—this will probably interest you as an historian—was bullet proof economically. Everyone would say that. “Hey, we've got Mac truck, we've got Bethlehem Steel here, we've got Kraft”—and all of those things.

TS: That would be there forever.

LW: That would be there forever. Well, all of them are gone now, but when I was there, they were all there. So it was a pretty prosperous time to be growing up. My parents had me and my brother and my sister. My dad just worked for a carpet place selling carpet—retail store. My mom would help out every once in a while, but they were able to send the three of us to college debt-free for us. That was the promise; if we worked when we were in high school, they would send us to college. It's hard to believe now. So that's what happened. [They were first generation], but the three of us got sent to college. I went to High Point College in High Point, North Carolina.

TS: I looked on the website first of all to find out where High Point College is—college then and university today. It looks like a beautiful campus.

LW: Yes, there was just an article about it in the *Chronicle of [Higher] Education*. They've got a new president who graduated from there a long time ago, made a lot of money, promotional and stuff, and he's got a \$250 million building program for this little college, which was 1,200 students when I went there.

TS: I think the website says 3,300 today.

LW: Is that right? Well, actually, I just ran into somebody from the communication department at a conference. They're getting a brand new communication department, and the *Chronicle of Education's* article is actually pretty funny because they have a Director of WOW, and his job is to make sure that the students there are involved in campus life. They have a concierge on campus. I actually made a little video for my old fraternity brothers. It's a college now that's on the move, at least financially. I went to school there and got out of school. I was not sure what I was going to do. It was a turbulent time in the country—this was 1966 that I got out.

TS: How did you get to a Methodist school in the first place?

LW: It's a long, interesting story that I'm almost embarrassed to say now, but when I was in high school, I think it is part of being the first generation, but I was not a scholar in high school or anything. I said, "I don't know if I'm ever going to college." And a guy up the street, Gary Uhlmann, whose sister was at High Point, said, "You should apply there; you'll get into High Point." This is even more hard to believe—I applied, I got accepted, never saw the school.

TS: Until you got there?

LW: Until I got there. I still remember the moment when my dad and my mom took me to the bus station, a sixteen hour bus ride from Allentown, and him waving with tears in his eyes, and me getting down there and showing up at three o'clock in the morning on the campus, and nobody was around. So I sat on my footlocker until morning, until the campus opened, and there I was.

TS: They're selective nowadays in enrollment. Or maybe they've always been and found your application attractive because they wanted diversity of different parts of the country.

LW: I am still in touch because of the Internet with a lot of my friends from there. In fact, we had a reunion for them. We have a place up in New Hampshire, and I had a reunion for them not too long ago. Fifty of them came out, and they're all doing well in all kinds of professions. So even then, it was this little Methodist school, but it drew from New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, and, of course, from North Carolina and Virginia and the South. But mostly I would say North Carolina and north up to Pennsylvania, so it was geographically diverse. It wasn't diverse in terms of ethnicity at that time because those were the years when it was just making the transition.

TS: Sure. So you're saying '66 you got out, and we're in the middle of the Vietnam War, and there was turmoil.

LW: It was the middle of the war, and I'm just waiting to get drafted, basically.

TS: Had the turmoil reached High Point College?

LW: No. It had in the sense that we were all going to be drafted, and so everyone was apprehensive about it.

TS: But no protest movements?

LW: There was no social consciousness wake up then, and that's the interesting part. So I came to New York, and for whatever reason I just didn't get my draft notice when everybody else got their draft notice. I was hanging around New York waiting to get drafted. Somebody said, "Go to the Board of Education; they need teachers." I went. Somebody said you could get a C certificate so I said, "Well, do you have a C certificate?" I don't know where that term came from. The woman said, "No, I've never heard of such a thing." I said, "Okay." Then she said, "You've heard haven't you? We

have a special program, if you have a degree—six weeks, eight credits, and we'll put you in a classroom in September.” This was like June, so six weeks, eight credits at the then City College, now the City University of New York. They promised me three things: that when I got this job, because I was a male, they would put me in third grade or above—that was back then; that I would be teaching in the borough that I lived in—I lived in Manhattan; and that they would pay me at the end of the first month. I got assigned to the Southeast Bronx from Manhattan, they put me in a second grade classroom, and they lost my paycheck at the end of the month.

TS: Well, at least you got deferred.

LW: I got deferred, and it was a very, very important part of my life. In those days you could be really, really naive coming out of the 1950s into the early 1960s and just not have a clue as to what was going on. We talk about our students being naïve. My wife [Diana L. Westneat Witt], because she came from a more educated family, and her step-father now was a professor at Yale, she was more aware of what was going on. But if you came out of a town like Allentown, there was a very good chance that you were . . .

TS: What you're describing sounds very familiar to me. I graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1964, and grew up in Knoxville, and the world was quite different back then.

LW: Yes, it's almost embarrassing to say it now. All of this stuff was going on, and we weren't aware of it.

TS: I remember when we had our first hippie on campus. Everybody turned around and stared.

LW: Right, right. But now I'm in New York and have met some friends.

TS: New York is the center of everything.

LW: It is the center of everything.

TS: Including protests.

LW: Including protests. A couple of people I know started saying, “You should be reading this; you should be reading that. You should be reading this.” A lot of books such as Frantz Fanon [*The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published in France in 1961; English translation 1963) about Algerian [colonialism and the struggle for independence] and all of these different books that I should have been exposed to in college, but I wasn't.

TS: Did you identify with Jewish culture, Polish culture or . . . ?

LW: No, we actually grew up Catholic. My dad wasn't a strictly religious Jew, but he always made sure that he went to the High [Holiday] services every year. Because of being up in

Wilkes-Barre and Allentown, just my mom's family was there. So we were brought up Catholic but not in Catholic schools and all.

TS: I was just thinking—that flourishing Jewish culture in New York—whether you were a part of that at all? But I guess not.

LW: All of my life I have been—and I don't even think of it often—immersed in various cultures. It's true that a lot of my life influences have been as much Jewish as they have been Catholic. In fact, we're connected again with the [Witt] family, like I said, here. My brother [Barry Witt] got out of college and went to work for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation [FDIC] and then decided to go into selling men's clothing, wholesale to retail. He went to work for a company called McGregor, which is still around, but was much bigger back then. Then it turned out that my dad's side of the family heard that he was in the business. Billy Cohen called him from Isaac Cohen and Sons, a top-coat company in New York, and asked if my brother wanted to go work for them. So he worked for them for a long time. In fact, my dad worked for his sister and brother-in-law in Allentown, and they ran this carpet store then.

TS: So he didn't stay in Talladega very long, I guess.

LW: He grew up in Talladega, and he left when he was, I don't know, in his twenties or something.

TS: Okay, so in their married life they were always in Pennsylvania.

LW: Correct. They met in Wilkes-Barre, Northeast Pennsylvania. He had his own business, but then things didn't work out, so he came to work for his sister for the rest of his life. He was never totally happy doing that, I don't think, working for his brother-in-law, but he worked hard.

TS: Well, when I grew up, the University of Tennessee recruited a lot of football players from the coalmines in Pennsylvania, so they had some exotic names for Knoxville in those days.

LW: Well, football is so big. It's hard to believe that when I was in high school they would travel from Allentown, Pennsylvania to Philadelphia schools; they would travel up to New Jersey; they were playing all over the Northeast. Our high school stadium—they built a new stadium for 25,000 people, and they would fill it: new stadium. It was like a million dollars back then, which is lot of money, but then they built another high school and it sort of faded.

TS: Okay, so how did you get out of teaching elementary school in New York? And what grades did you teach?

LW: I taught second grade the first year and then fifth grade for the other years. Then after I had done it for about three and a half years, I realized I wasn't going to teach and didn't

know what I was going to do. So I went back to school to get a master's degree in sociology from the New School for Social Research. It was a great time to be there, again, because all this turmoil is going on, and it's happening in the street, and there are really smart people teaching the courses there. I did that and then also came to the conclusion that I'd never met a sociologist in my life, and where would I get a job. At the same time there was all this turmoil going on. I used to go to the second floor of the New York Historical Society. They had a beautiful little library up there with nice, oak tables, and no one was ever there. I would go in there every day because by this time I was substitute teaching. So I had a little free time. It's hard to believe that you could be a substitute teacher in New York and live in Manhattan. When I was teaching, it cost me \$125 a month for an apartment, and I had my own apartment. So anyhow, I would go up there. All of this turmoil was going on, and I was trying to make sense of it. I would sit there and write every day. It was an important part for me because, frankly, when I was in college, I never wrote that much, and writing was never an important part of my life. But I'd go up there, and I would be having what I thought at the time were revelations—miraculous stuff because you're sitting there, and you're writing, and you're writing, and you're writing, and new ideas are popping out. These ideas don't come to you in conversation usually; they come to you when you're having these little internal conversations with yourself. Whether or not those ideas were profound, I thought they were at the time. I still have the notebooks, and I should go back and look at them because it'd be a little historical document anyhow.

TS: Save them and put them in the KSU Archives.

LW: There you go. But maybe they'd be too embarrassing to me.

TS: Yes, when I give away my old books, I always look through them and see what notes I wrote in the margins to see if I need to scratch them out before I let anybody else see what I might have said thirty or forty years ago.

LW: Right. I'm sure these would embarrass me today.

TS: Still, if you can get beyond the embarrassment, it could be a real interesting window into the age.

LW: I think so, and I should go back and look and go back and do what historians would do and find out what other people were writing and saying at the same time. Then I could personalize it because I would have some of these notes. It's probably me whining about the weather or something.

TS: Well, everybody having these revelations was as nutty as a fruitcake back then.

LW: Yes. So there I was in the midst of all this, and I'm writing, and I realized that I didn't really want to be a sociologist. I had completed all of my coursework. All I had to do was a master's thesis. But I decided this just wasn't for me. Then I tried all different kinds of writing forms. I would try and do kids books and fiction and science fiction, and

I realized that journalism was probably going to be the way I was going to go. I had sold a couple of little essays. I tell my students this one story. I may as well tell it. It's this little anecdote about how my first published piece got published. In *The Village Voice*, which was then the alternative newspaper. . . .

TS: All right.

LW: It wasn't published in there, oh no, it wasn't published in there. There was an ad in there for *Biplanes*, and they'd pay fifty dollars for a piece. Fifty dollars back then was what I got paid for a whole day of substitute teaching. So I sent this nice, cute, little essay about sounds, violins versus noises—the city noises, the screechy subways, and all. I sent it off to the *Biplanes*. So the guy called me up from there and said, “Hey, we're going to publish it, and we can pay you fifty bucks.” I thought, “Wow, this is really great.” At the end he said, “By the way, have you ever published pornography?” I said, “No.” He said, “Okay, just asking.” Then he told me where to come and pick up the papers. At this time Times Square was still pretty seedy, and there was a seedy little walk up hotel in Times Square. I knock on the door, and he gives me the check, and he gives me the two papers from the *Biplanes*. Well, it's a pornographic newspaper for bi-sexual men. Then, in the middle of it . . .

TS: And you didn't know that?

LW: No, I had no clue. Then in the middle this was my little essay, which could have been in the *Christian Science Monitor* about sounds versus noises. In the middle of this thing there is my little essay with little cupids floating around it. I thought, “What is going on?” So I got home, and I told a friend about it, and he says, “Well, you know why they published it don't you?” I said, “No.” He said, “Because to get it through the mail they have to show that it has some redeeming value, and they were using your story as their redeeming value.” So as I tell my students now, make sure when you write something now it has some redeeming value [laughter].

TS: Needless to say, you didn't write too much more for them.

LW: No, that was just this one little thing.

TS: That was your first publication.

LW: That was my first published piece. I got paid for it anyhow. Then there was a paper on the Eastside of New York, which is still there and is still not very good, but it's called *Our Town*. It was one of these handouts, but it was a newspaper. I got in touch with him, and he said, “Yeah, you can write. We can't pay you, but you can write.” So I wrote stories. I remember the first story I did was with Mayor [Edward Irving] Koch, who was then a councilman for the city [from 1966-68; U.S. Congressman, 1969-77; Mayor, 1978-89]. He was at a PTA meeting, and how I struggled over that story. This was prior to computers and even electric typewriters, so I had my little manual typewriter. At two

o'clock in the morning I'm typing away and not getting any progress and telling my wife I can't do this.

TS: Married and still not bringing in much income.

LW: Well, we weren't quite married at that time; we were then living together in New York City in the apartment. So I went to sleep at two o'clock in the morning, couldn't sleep. This is just a little, dinky story, but it was my first. I had to get up at five. I wrote the thing, and they took it, and they published it. So then I kept writing more stories. My soon to be in-laws had a place in Sandwich, New Hampshire. We have gone up there a lot. It's a beautiful place. We still go up there. They have died, but my wife and her two sisters [still own it].

TS: Is it in the mountains?

LW: It's in the White Mountains, yes; it's just perfect. When I retire, though, I'm going to have to retire with my wife and her two sisters [laughter]. So, anyhow, we have this place in New Hampshire, and they had it then. We'd all go up there for holidays to visit. I looked in *Editor and Publisher*, which is a trade magazine, and it had a job for journalists for the *Carroll County Independent*. I applied for it and got a call. There I was on Ninety-sixth and Amsterdam. We were living in a Mitchell-Lama building, which is middle-income housing in New York City, which meant we were the first tenants in this apartment. So there I was, and within a few months we were living on a dead-end road on Conway Lake in Conway, New Hampshire, and I was working as a journalist without ever having taken a journalism course.

TS: From public housing in New York?

LW: It wasn't really public housing; it was middle-income subsidized housing. In fact, it's now reverted back to private housing. They had some sort of thirty-year lease or contract on it. We still see it when we go to New York. It was great. We were on the nineteenth floor, and we had a balcony overview of the Hudson River. But it was very noisy, at that time especially. New York is actually quieter than it used to be. There used to be people blowing their horns constantly, so it was extremely noisy. Then suddenly we're on this little, dead-end road on Conway Lake in a little cottage that had just one register between the kitchen and the living room—one big register that blew hot air in. But this was where it could get to twenty or thirty degrees below zero, and it wasn't insulated. So we often knew which way the wind was blowing from.

TS: Oh my.

LW: We were young then. So that was my first job, and I spent three and a half years there. Again, no formal journalism training, but it was a perfect job. I covered the northern part of this county. The office was in Center Ossipie, New Hampshire.

TS: Okay, that's got to be an Indian name.

LW: Yes. I only had to go down one day a week. I was paid full time for the week, and I covered everything and had to do it, but I had to go down to the office just one day a week. So I was pretty much on my own to figure out where the stories were and what the stories were. So we did that for three and a half years. Then we just realized that I wanted to move on. I wanted to try freelancing. My wife Diana wanted to go back to school. She was the other connection to the *New York Times*: my mom got her education through the *New York Times*; my wife, when I met her—we met at the altar of a church where they were having a block association meeting at, I think, Seventy-fifth and Central Park West—was the indexer for the *New York Times*. So that was another kind of *New York Times* connection. I'm one of the few people who didn't have any money whose wedding announcement was in the *New York Times* because, if you worked for the *New York Times*, you'd get your wedding announced in the *New York Times*.

TS: How about that?

LW: Yes, that was a big deal. You can look it up in the index that she used to do. Back then, I don't know if you remember, but every year the *New York Times* put out this big, thick, five or six inch red book called the *New York Times Index*, and that's what she did. We were up there. She wanted to go back to get a degree in library science at Simmons College in Boston. I wanted to try freelancing. So we left Conway and moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I tried freelancing for a year, and things weren't going well. I made, I think, \$1,200 bucks. I conceived these really well-written stories, but I just couldn't figure out how to do it.

TS: So Portsmouth is within commuter distance to Boston?

LW: Yes, it's about an hour away. Actually, she had a friend there who she would stay with for a couple of days and then come back, but, yes, it's just a little bit more than an hour north of Boston, whereas Conway where we lived was about two and a half hours. Conway is really up in the mountains, but it was beautiful.

TS: So you're freelancing. Is that when you started a master's program at the University of New Hampshire?

LW: Yes, because I didn't know what I was going to do. A friend of ours who has a place next to the farm that my in-laws had—Stephen Dobyns is his name, and he's a well-known poet—told me about the University of New Hampshire. He said, "You should go here. They've got a great program under Don [Donald Morrison] Murray." Anybody who knows about writing, especially teachers who teach writing—knows about Don Murray. He just recently passed away [on 30 December 2006], but he was the guru of teaching teachers how to teach writing. He was just a great man. By this time I was no kid. I was in my thirties and trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life. I didn't know if I really wanted to go back to graduate school. I decided not to and then decided I would. Fortunately, Don Murray took me in. I was really fortunate in that I got to teach freshman composition for the first year I was there. It was a two-year program,

and then the second year [I taught] sophomore composition. This program was really writing intensive. It's through the English department, but it's a master's in non-fiction writing. So I wrote and wrote and wrote, and my writing was getting better because I was working with students. I would find this out later on, but it wasn't a lot different to work with students on their writing or work with professionals, especially the way Don Murray had set it up.

TS: Do you think it's good for students to get a straight English degree as opposed to a communication degree, if they want to write for a newspaper?

LW: It worked for me. I haven't mentioned my kids, but I have two kids, Steven and Emily Witt. My daughter, just two weeks ago, started the master's program at Columbia University in journalism. But now we don't know that there's going to be any journalism jobs, which I will get at as we go on.

TS: I interrupted you; you were talking about Murray.

LW: Don Murray. And you asked me if I thought [an English degree was better than a communication degree]. It worked for me because I wasn't interested in the daily grind of doing daily journalism. I was more interested in magazine writing and deep feature writing, so in that respect it helped.

TS: So you never really did daily journalism other than that first three and a half years, did you?

LW: No, not as a reporter. And that first three and a half years was a weekly newspaper. When I came to the University of New Hampshire and I was teaching and doing my master's degree, because I was older, I felt like I wasn't doing enough here. So every Friday I worked for a paper there called *Foster's Daily Democrat* [headquartered in Dover, New Hampshire]. Some people thought I worked there full time because I produced so much. It had the privilege of being the oldest newspaper in America [founded by Joshua Foster in 1873] with the family name in the masthead that was still owned by the family. It was Bob Foster at that time, and I think the [family] still owns it [currently owned by the George J. Foster Company]. Most places have been sold off. So I worked there, and then I also worked Friday nights and Saturday nights as a waiter just trying to make money. I borrowed some money from my brother Barry to go to school. He was the one selling men's clothing and actually making a living. You wouldn't think he could, but he made a really good living and retired at forty-two years old.

TS: Wow.

LW: Yes, unlike me. So I went and got the master's degree, came out of there thinking finally I'm going to get a great job, and actually found myself working as a stringer for the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*. This was a daily job reporting. It was awful because I had to go fifty miles to file my stories, and I just covered this little part.

TS: Still no computers?

LW: Actually, this was the very first. I don't know if it was a computer, but this was why I had to go up and file the stories. I had to drive these fifty miles, and they had a little box there with a green screen on it that you would type in your stories. Then that would transmit that story in to their files. So I don't know if it was even a computer or just a transmission box, but it was getting close to it. For me, one of the big luxuries was that my wife was book indexing—freelancing in a job for the *New York Times*. So they sent her an IBM selector. Oh, my gosh, you could type, and then you could hit this button, and it went back one space and made a correction for you [laughter]. This was such a luxury because you didn't have to redo everything. This job was not paying me very well, and it didn't look like I was going to get a full time job at the *Portland Maine Press Herald* and my wife was pregnant with our son. We were just in a dither. We didn't know what was going to happen. I saw an ad for the *Allentown Morning Call* where I grew up. It was for a copy editor, not a reporter. I got the job. I had been away for seventeen years. They thought I actually knew something about the city. I didn't know that much about it when I showed up there again. I got the job, and it was a step up from my other job, but this was a job where I was the night obituary copy editor, and I worked from six o'clock at night until two o'clock in the morning from Tuesday to Saturday. I was proud of it and happy that I had a job. But because I had this experience doing these long feature stories and that master's degree—and this is where it all came in—and working with students, when John Lennon was shot, the music guy and I said, "Let's put together a special section on this." We put together this special section, and people took notice of me. "Maybe he shouldn't just be a night copy editor on the obituaries." So I worked my way up, and eventually by the time I left there I was the acting city editor for the paper. Then I became the editor of the feature section which was called *a.m. Magazine*. This was from 1979 to 1984. Finally, I was on a career path. I was no kid by this time. I'm on a career path, and I'm getting real wages. At the time the *Allentown Morning Call* was really a beautifully designed newspaper. Newspaper design was really just coming in, and the feature section would be the best designed paper. So I'd often get invited to conferences to talk about that. I went to one, and I said, "If you took the *Allentown Morning Call*, and you crunched it down, at the end of the week you'd have a really great Sunday magazine." I said this at a conference in New York. At the end of it, Linda Picone from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* came up to me and said, "Would you be interested in applying for the editorship of the *Sunday Magazine* at the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*?"

TS: Wow.

LW: That's what I said too. So off we went. I got that job and did that for six years, I was the editor of the *Sunday Magazine*. What I thought was going to be a career of magazine writing now had, basically, turned into a career of editing.

TS: Hope your house was insulated by this time.

LW: Yes, yes! Well, it was the same weather. The weather was not really different than from New Hampshire.

TS: I guess not from the mountains of New Hampshire.

LW: Right, both places were very cold. I was so stupid when I moved there. I moved to a house on a corner, so I had to shovel the whole corner rather than just a little piece. In fact, when I went and applied for that job, it was minus eleven degrees when I arrived in Minneapolis, and it never got above that. So one of the people said . . . .

TS: They probably figured if you took the job when it was minus eleven you could cope with it.

LW: Actually, they were thinking, if this guy takes this job in this weather there's something wrong with him [laughter]. So I was there for six years running the *Sunday Magazine*. It was a great job. But, then, Sunday magazines used to be really thick and big. This is important: this was an indication—no one knew it then—of this slow decline of newspaper business. There was a time when the Sunday magazine was really thick. It had many color ads that had to go in the paper. The coupons were there and the liquor ads. But then along came the coupons, and then along came color throughout the paper. Then along came the city magazines taking away the quality ads. So, by then, the only thing we had left in that paper was cigarette ads. Then one day they disappeared, and somebody looked at the magazine balance sheet and said, "We can't do it any more." At the time, five cigarette ads—ten thousand dollars each per page because the paper then had a circulation of six or seven hundred thousand on a Sunday—[brought in] fifty thousand dollars times fifty weeks or \$2.5 million per year. So that disappeared, and so did that job. Then I was thinking whether I'd get absorbed in the newspaper, and I get a call from the publisher of *Minnesota Monthly Magazine*. He asked, because the word had been out that the Sunday magazine was going to disappear, if I wanted to go to work there. Again, it was just like suddenly it was from an *a.m. Magazine*, which is like a little feature section in a newspaper, to *Sunday Magazine* in the *Star Tribune*, which was a magazine inside a newspaper, to an honest-to-God slick *Atlanta* type magazine or a *Philadelphia* magazine. I was editor there for six years. My life tends to go in these little six-year cycles.

Then, when I was doing that project—and this takes us to the public and civic journalism project—we were writing a lot of stories about people getting killed because this was 1990 through 1996 when I came here, and there were a lot of homicides going on. We were pretty good at it, these narrative stories. Then one day I woke up and said, "I'm not going to do any more of these stories ever. They're not informing anybody; there's not news; there's just no reason to do them." I came up with this idea, the Minnesota Action Plan to End Gun Violence. I went and talked to some people and actually got some funding for it, and we put out a special thirty-six page section, no advertising, no experts at all. We just went out and talked to six hundred people around the state, all over the state, and had these forums and all. I didn't even know it was public journalism at the time. The people came up with these ideas, and we did this special thirty-six page

section. It changed the way I was going to practice journalism from then on. The *Minnesota Monthly* is a for-profit wing of Minnesota Public Radio; I should have mentioned that. After that succeeded I sent a letter to Bill [William H.] Kling, who is really well known in public radio circles. He's turned Minnesota Public Radio into this juggernaut public radio, and I told him we should have a public journalism or civic journalism program at MPR. He agreed and immediately sent a letter over to my boss saying that he'd like me to come over to Minnesota Public Radio. Then for six years I ran this civic journalism initiative. I was the executive director of the civic journalism initiative at Minnesota Public Radio where we brought people together to talk about public policy issues and tried to persuade the journalists to reach out deeper into communities and not just talk to elites. So I did that for six years and then that came to an end.

TS: Before we go on to the next step, I know you've talked about this and taught about this before, but journalists traditionally, I guess, only interviewed elected officials, college presidents, elites, you were saying. . . .

LW: They tend to do that. Civic Journalism or Public Journalism started in 1988. It was a reaction to the Michael Dukakis, George Bush election. A woman named Charlotte Grimes, who wrote about it, called it a sleaze and trivia-dominated election. The problem was that the journalists went along with it. The spin-doctors were pretty much running the campaign, and the journalists were willing dupes. So along came people like Jay Rosen and Buzz Merritt [W. Davis Merritt, Jr., former editor of the *Wichita Eagle*] and a group of academics and journalists basically—Cole C. Campbell—he was a newspaper editor [former editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and former dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno] and Jay Rosen is professor [of Journalism] at New York University and still well known. So they came up with this reform movement, civic journalism, and said, "Look, it's time for you all to find out, instead of these issues like the flag and patriotism and all of these sorts of issues that the people aren't really, truly interested in. If you go and ask them, what's important to you, they'll say health care and education." So the idea was that we'd go out to the people and talk to the people and then when the politicians or the spin-doctors would start talking about the flag or prayer in the schools or whatever those hot button issues were, the journalists could say, "But I just talked to one hundred people, and they said this is the question they want to ask; and it's about health care or education or whatever else." So that was the beginning of it. But it was hard to do because you had to assemble these people; you had to make sure that you had a balanced audience that you were talking to. So it was an expensive operation, but that's what I did basically for those six years.

TS: That's really only twenty years ago, if 1988 is when you said all this started.

LW: Right, that's when it started. But it was always a battle because the journalists don't want outside people setting the agenda for us. That was kind of the thing. Or they would say, "Well, you're saying go out and talk to the people, that's just good journalism." We would say, "Yeah, it is, but you're not practicing it." That was the argument. People like Jay Rosen, he's a pretty feisty guy, but he was always battling the journalists. But not all.

There was the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. The Pew Foundation put up ten million dollars over several years to help make this initiative work in different ways. It was waning, and my job at Minnesota Public Radio—I could see that it wasn't going to last forever. It was coming to an end. By this time in my career, I always thought the last days of my career, I think in terms of these five year plans that I do.

TS: You're making me nervous because you've been here six years.

LW: No, I'm not going to leave this job. This is it! [laughter] This is my terminal job. No, I'm going to stick around here because I really, really like what's happening here and the possibilities, and there's a lot of important work that has to get done. So I had, even by about the early 1990s, thought that I'd want to teach. I put together a book called *The Complete Book of Feature Writing* [Writer's Digest Books, 1991], which I still use. I went out and talked to feature writers and got thirty of them to agree because I had been putting out this thing called *Style* for the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors, I put out a journal for them. I just volunteered and did it. I would get people to write for that. I knew if I could get them to write for that I could get them to write for a book.

TS: A book that teaches style?

LW: This book is how to write features. It's called *The Complete Book of Feature Writing*. Everyone wrote a different essay, and I coordinated it. A lot of times you get a lot of people writing, and it is distant topics that don't seem to hold together, but this holds together really well. I got a lot of best feature writers from around the country to write for it. That was in the back of my mind that some day that I want to teach, and it would be good to have this little credit. So my job at Minnesota Public Radio was coming to an end. I didn't know quite what the next stage was going to be, but I always knew I wanted to teach, so I went to see somebody at the University of Minnesota that I knew, and I said, "What do I have to do to get into academia?" She said, "Well, the first thing is you go to the AEJMC, which is the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and look and see what kind of jobs they have posted." So this was like February 14, 2002, I think it was.

TS: This is going to their website?

LW: This was going to their website. And there was a job for Kennesaw State University, which I'd never heard of before. I read it, and I told my wife, "I'm the only person in the country who meets all these qualifications that they're asking for." I don't know too many other people who would do it because they wanted somebody who had journalism experience and who knew about public journalism, had an advanced degree—not necessarily a doctor's degree but had an advanced degree—and also could do some fund-raising. Because I'd worked for public radio I knew a little bit about that. But then at the bottom of the ad it said to be guaranteed to be considered for this position applications have to be in by February 15. This was the 14<sup>th</sup>, so I was really busy that night. By now the Internet was around, so I was really busy, and I sent it off, and sure enough. I think

Keisha [L.] Hoerrner was the person who received the e-mail, and I said, “I think I’m the only person that I can think of who can meet a lot of these qualifications.” She said, “It looks that way too.” So I got the job. It’s the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication; that’s the job.

TS: When did you come down for your interview?

LW: It seems like it was probably in March, somewhere in there.

TS: So it was not eleven degrees below zero.

LW: No, no, it was quite beautiful. We walked around, and then later my wife came down. The first neighborhood we walked through we talked to a woman on the street there doing some stuff. Surprisingly, we moved into that neighborhood. It’s right off the Marietta Square. It’s a nice, little old house. We like older houses, so it’s perfect. So I had this job as this Distinguished Chair.

TS: You could tell them you were a southern boy; your father was from Alabama.

LW: You know, sixty miles away. It’s hard to believe! One of my relatives here, Barry Katz, got in touch with me, and he introduced us back to the bigger Witt family and clan. We had known him because we weren’t totally out of touch with my dad’s family because when I was five years old we drove from Allentown to visit the relatives in Birmingham, Alabama. It’s hard to believe that little old Dodge car that had no air conditioning driving from Allentown—this was before my sister was born—it was my brother and I, my mom and my dad, and my grandmother and my uncle. That’s how you used to travel back then. You all packed into a car.

TS: Did you think you were going to another country?

LW: Oh, yeah, I was little then; I was like five years old. That’s just about it. We had seen Barry maybe one other time. So anyhow, here at Kennesaw was an endowed chair.

TS: You were starting to explain the Robert D. Fowler chair. Tell who he is.

LW: Okay. And this is where the *New York Times* recurs again in my life. Robert D. Fowler owned the *Gwinnett Daily News*. He had bought it when I think it was still a bi-weekly; it wasn’t even a daily. He and his wife Judith bought the paper. They built it up just as Kennesaw itself, the university was growing. So was the whole area, and so was the *Gwinnett Daily News*. The *New York Times*, apparently, wanted to go to war against the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and they bought the *Gwinnett Daily News* for I think one hundred million dollars.

TS: So the Fowlers had plenty of money.

LW: The Fowlers had plenty of money, and the thing didn't work out for the *New York Times*. Robert Fowler died, and Judith came to the university and basically offered \$500,000 to set up this endowed chair.

TS: Fowler has been editor of the *Marietta Daily Journal* at one time.

LW: That's correct. So, there was the *New York Times* indirectly subsidizing my job.

TS: Fowler actually headed the twenty-eight person committee that got the bond referendum through in 1964 to create Kennesaw Junior College.

LW: Correct. So they had this combination. At the time it was supposed to be a match; the state was supposed to match that. They were tardy in doing that, but President Dan [Daniel S.] Papp came and talked to one of the local legislators. This year, the second \$500,000 was given to it. Along with that becomes the title of eminent scholar, which kind of scares me in some ways.

TS: Oh, so it took just six years to get that match.

LW: Yes, and I got tenure last year, so it all came together.

TS: Oh, okay, so what is your title now?

LW: It is Eminent Scholar and Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication.

TS: And Associate Professor of Communication.

LW: That's correct, that's all there. My job before at Minnesota Public Radio was executive director of the Minnesota Public Radio Civic Journalism Initiative, but I think my new title is actually longer, finally.

TS: Well, we'll all have to bow down whenever we see you with a title like Eminent Scholar.

LW: It's scary [laughter].

TS: Okay, 2002, just out of the blue you looked at the ads at the right time, saw Kennesaw, got the job. Kennesaw obviously wanted somebody that had lots of practical experience, and that was far more important than a Ph.D. or the academic type credentials.

LW: Right, this was set up a little differently because it was a separate endowed chair. The faculty of the Communication department defined this job. They worked with Craig E. Aronoff from the Coles College of Business, who was running the search.

TS: Oh, that's right because he's got a background in journalism. His bachelor's degree was in journalism from Northwestern University.

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LW: Okay. So, anyway, he headed the search committee, and I got the job.

TS: And the position was really advertised as someone who was going to do public journalism, wasn't it?

LW: It was going to move public journalism forward and also help Kennesaw State and the department get better known. That was part of the job description. They asked if I would be writing, and I said, "I always write; it's just part of what I do." It was an interesting time because when I arrived here public journalism was waning; people weren't even using the term nationwide. Because this Pew Center for Civic Journalism, which was the catalyst—they did workshops, and they gave prizes [the James K. Batten Award for Excellence in Civic Journalism]—the Pew Center was going to disappear in the spring of 2003. So what I had decided to do is that I invited twenty-four of the top practitioners and academics in public journalism to come to Kennesaw.

TS: Public and civic are the same thing?

LW: Same thing, yes. Public journalism, civic journalism, the same thing.

TS: So twenty-four of the leading practitioners of public journalism came to Kennesaw.

LW: And academics. Both combinations.

TS: And that's 2003?

LW: January of 2003. They came here with the express idea of having what I would call a navigation tool for public journalism to take it into the future. We developed a charter, and it was supposed to be a professional society for journalists and academics interested in public journalism. We had another meeting in the summer at the AEJMC, which is the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. That first year that I came here I volunteered to be the vice chair for the Civic Journalism Group then, and now it's the Civic and Citizen Journalism Interest Group. So we met again, and somebody said, "I think that public journalism is book-ended. It started in 1988, and it's going to end now, and that's going to be it." But Jay Rosen was there, and he said, "We've got to keep the flame alive; let's not give up on it." Also in that year, 2003, before I had these people come here, I did online forums to discuss the idea. Then, when they would come here, we wouldn't be wasting a lot of time on issues that we could work out online. Forum notes are available at <http://pjnet.org/forum/>. The Charter Declaration can be found at <http://pjnet.org/charter/>. Photos of the first Public Journalism Network meeting are at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/>. A summary of the meeting can be found at <http://pjnet.org/summit/>. An op-ed piece I wrote just before the summit is at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/opedpiece.htm>. More links are at <http://www.kennesawsummit.kennesaw.edu/>.

Griff Wigley had run the forums for me, and I had known him from Minnesota because he used to do all the work for the *Utne Reader*. I don't know if you're familiar with the

*Utne Reader*. The *Utne Reader* is kind of the *Reader's Digest* for progressives; they would go and find all these liberal articles. They were one of the first places to do online forums. They had the Utne cafes and salons, and Griff actually started it. This is important because in March of 2003 he called me and said, "Len, you ought to start a web blog, you ought to start a blog." I said, "What?" He said, "You ought to start a blog. That's the only way you can get the word out on what you're doing." I didn't pay much attention to him, but he kept insisting, and so eventually I started PJNet.org for the Public Journalism Network.

So I kept writing about issues, and it became a really important part of what I do because it became a public file cabinet. I would recommend this for any journalist. I just did a panel on it not too long ago. Anytime I came across any kind of popular literature, academic literature, scholarship, I would write about it at the blog, and then I would have all my references there, and it was like this file cabinet. Somebody at the Poynter Institute [for Media Studies] talked about writing where he had a shoe box where he would put everything in there. It was almost like a compost heap. You would keep throwing stuff in there, and eventually, somehow, it would mature into fine soil. This had the same sort of thing. So when I had to give a lecture or wanted to write something, I could do searches and find it in there, and it didn't disappear.

TS: How much time a day do you spend on your blog?

LW: Then I was probably spending a couple of hours a day, at least, somewhere in there. By the time I would read and find the right stuff to post up there, maybe more than that. At first, I would do a search for public journalism, and I would come up on page fifteen of Google, and I would think, "This is a waste of my time." I would tell Griff that, and he said, "No, just keep doing it, you'll see what happens." So I kept doing it, and the way this thing works is if one of the big boys who has a lot of readers and a lot of links picks it up, it moves you up in the algorithms that they use. Then after, I don't know, a couple of years of doing that, if you typed in public journalism, I came up first on Google, which meant, I tell people, I own this international franchise for public journalism. So, often, if anybody around the world wants to find out about public journalism, they will send me an e-mail or they'll pick up a part of what I write. Another indication of that is I got a call a couple of years back from a guy in Ecuador who asked if I'd want to come down there and do some workshops based on my blog. I mentioned to him a price that I knew he couldn't pay, and he said, "Well, we can't pay that." I said, "Okay, here's the deal; if you can fly me down there, and you get me an apartment for three weeks, I'll come down and do a week's worth of workshops. Then I'll hang out in Ecuador." So that's what we did. It was quite nice. I had a little apartment in Quito, and he took us to the beach, and my wife came down and my son and his girlfriend at the time, and we traveled around Ecuador. But really it was to do this weeklong workshop on public journalism.

More recently, about a year ago, I started coming up with this idea of Representative Journalism. Because this blog helps me keep current on everything, I think I saw before most people that newspapers were in dire straits, and they might actually disappear. In fact, a lot of this movement, I ran a big conference in Toronto first on the fusion power of

public and participatory journalism: <http://pjnet.org/toronto/>. I think that was in 2004. About sixty people came to it. This was just before the AEJMC conference; it was a little pre-conference. Then the next year I got a grant with Cole Campbell who, unfortunately, died unexpectedly in an automobile accident about a year ago [5 January 2007], but he became the dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. We got a grant together on restoring the trust in journalism. Part of that grant was to do this conference in San Antonio for the AEJMC. I realized things were so bad that I came up with the idea of a wake up call: [http://restoringthetrust.org/final\\_report.shtml](http://restoringthetrust.org/final_report.shtml). It was really to announce to the world that journalism was in deep trouble, more than anyone realized. More than 100 people came to that and a lot of the big players, people like Craig [Alexander] Newmark who did *craigslist* was there. If you don't know *craigslist*, if you were under thirty you would know *craigslist*.

TS: I would? Well then enlighten me.

LW: I'll tell you what *craigslist* is. Craig Newmark out in San Francisco put up this online site that is very searchable for anything you want. So if you want to figure out who has a sofa for sale, you go to *craigslist*, and you can find them. Well, this thing became so popular—it was giving away free classified, basically—it's worldwide now. Somebody said it's probably worth fifty billion dollars if you ever wanted to sell it or monetize it. He only sells ads for real estate in New York City, and he's still making several million dollars a year off of it. But it pulled the chair out from underneath newspapers; that was the first sign that newspapers were [in trouble] because the bedrock of newspaper foundation is classified ads. Phil [Philip] Meyer, who is a professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina, wrote a book called *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* [University of Missouri Press, 2004] and he said, "You can't compete with free." That was one of the first signs that newspapers were starting to bleed because all these classified ads were now disappearing. Then you had things like *Monster.com* which was for jobs and *craigslist* and that was the first time. Phil Meyer actually gave me the name for the wake up call that we were talking about. He was one of the speakers there and Jay Rosen and people from the *New York Times*. The final report is on the PJNet website. That was going on, and it was helping Kennesaw. I promised I would help get the name of Kennesaw known. When you have a conference, and one hundred people are there, and, probably, sixty of them are from universities—then I also held an AEJMC winter conference for young scholars—anybody—but a lot of young scholars and people who are going to graduate school came to Kennesaw. In fact, eighty of them came to Kennesaw from eighty different universities.

TS: Did you do it over at KSU Center?

LW: No, I did it in the Clendenin Building. I'd been to a couple of these before, and often these academic conferences are a little rag tag, and people eat off paper plates. So, for these graduate students, I thought I wanted to make it a special performance. We did it in a really nice building; we had meals; and we ate off china; and we did something up at the Jolley Lodge, had a little reception for them; and people still remember it. We were

just recruiting for people, and people are saying, “Yeah, I was at Kennesaw.” In fact, Dr. Birgit L. Wassmuth, who’s our chair, that’s how she found out about Kennesaw. She had come to this thing and was so impressed that when the job opened she applied for it. So I was fulfilling that service mission there on getting the university known. Blogging all of the time, building up, having this kind of franchise, and then I came up with this idea maybe two years ago of Representative Journalism because I saw the bottom was falling out. The question I started asking was what will journalism be like when only the journalism is left? In the past 80 to 86 percent of journalism has been subsidized by advertising. They’re decoupling now. Journalism and ads are growing further and further away. At the time what I was saying seemed extreme. I thought they were going to totally disappear, and I’m still semi-convinced that that’s going to happen because there are easier ways to reach me than to put an ad next to some news copy that I might or might not read. So that model is changing. I talked about who was going to employ journalists. I had just done an interview with Howard Witt—no relation to me—but he was at a conference and I heard him speak.

TS: From the *Chicago Tribune*?

LW: Yes, he works for the *Chicago Tribune*. He’s a correspondent in Houston, Texas. He went and did this story about a fourteen-year-old Black girl who shoved a hall monitor at her school, and the judge sentenced her to seven years in prison. That same judge a couple of weeks before—whatever it was—sentenced a white girl to probation after she intentionally burned down her parents’ house. He wrote this story, and out of nowhere he started getting all these e-mails, tons of e-mails, and he didn’t know where they were coming from. Then he found out it was from the Black blogosphere. All of these Black bloggers had seen this. I did a video interview that I used a little Flip camera—part of this whole digital revolution—and I asked, “Howard, three weeks?” He said, “Twenty-one days.” She was out of jail because so much protest was going on. He said that would not have happened in the past if he didn’t have this digital Black blogosphere.

Then he did the Jena [Louisiana] Six story, which was about these [Black] high school boys who had beat up another White student, and they were going to be charged with attempted murder. Even though the kid was beat up, he came out of the hospital that night and was fine the next day. So he wrote that story. But this time he went out and e-mailed a lot of people in the Black blogosphere and told them what was going. And that itself [led to] 26,000 people self-organized from all around the country. Nobody knows who the leader of this was. It was just self-organized from the blogosphere. They came to Jena, Louisiana, to protest this and got some racial justice done.

Then Howard said to me, “But you know, with all these cutbacks”—and the *Chicago Tribune* has been bought out by this guy named Sam [Samuel] Zell, who is really a real estate guy and doesn’t seem to care about journalism—“my job is probably going to disappear here in Houston, and they’re not going to support this job.” Why would the *Chicago Tribune* need a bureau in Houston? This is happening everywhere. To me, Howard was almost like the poster boy for what could happen, because the blogosphere played an important role, but [it wouldn’t have happened] if he hadn’t done the hard work

of journalism. He said, “Writing about civil rights is never an easy issue. It’s a complicated, nuanced issue. You really have to understand all the different sides.” Well, if we keep cutting back on what we pay journalists, you’re not going to have a Howard Witt in a place like Houston, and that fourteen year old would still be in jail. But you can do this with a thousand things.

So I started writing about the idea—this was before Howard Witt—of the thing that I call Representative Journalism. If you have an underserved community, let’s say it’s a city like Northfield, Minnesota, and I’ll get back to that in a minute, or it’s an area of passion or it’s an area of topic interest, so it could be like endangered species in Florida.... I was reading about the St. Petersburg paper [*St. Petersburg Times*], and they’re having cutbacks. They actually fund the Poynter Institute [founded in 1975 by Nelson Poynter, publisher of the *St. Petersburg Times*], which is for continuing education [for journalists and aspiring journalists]. The for-profit is owned by a non-profit. The person who owned it [Nelson Poynter] had turned it [the controlling share of stock in the Times Publishing Company] over to them [the Institute] in a will at one point [at the time of his death in 1978]. Even this paper is losing circulation and money. There was a story in there about one of the reporters who said at the end, “I’ve been able to cover endangered species around the state. That’s a little specialty they’ve allowed me to do. But I won’t be allowed to do that in the future.” So will a thousand people in Florida—this is Representative Journalism—be willing to put up, let’s say, \$100 each to pay for a journalist to cover that issue? If we can do enough of those around the country, we would provide a basically full service hub. You get your community together, and we’ll actually even help you get your community together, but if you can get the money, then we will do all the editing and be the firewall to make sure it’s ethical and sound journalism, and it’s not a P.R. operation.

So I was writing about this, and then out of nowhere—this is one of the great things about having a blog too, as well as a public file cabinet—I got a comment on my blog. It’s from Ruth Ann Harnisch, and she said, “Len, we can make this happen.” Well, I didn’t pay a lot of attention. Then I got a phone message, “Len, we can make this happen. Let’s do it.” So I said, “Who is this person?” I went and looked it up, and she’s a former journalist from Tennessee who now is married to William Harnisch. He runs a hedge fund, and they have a ten million dollar family foundation. Ruth Ann really likes my idea. I had a little video there that said, “Steal this idea” and told people, “If you like the idea go ahead and just take it because I don’t want to do it; I just want to write about it and talk about it.” She kept saying, “No, Len, you’re the only person who can do it because you really understand it; you’ve got to go do it.” She kept insisting, so I gave in and said, “All right, let’s see what will happen.” She gave me a nice grant to hire our first journalist/fellow. Her name is Bonnie Obremski, and she’s twenty-five years old. We’re doing it in Northfield because this is where Griff Wigley is and because he knows about online communities. He runs this blog, and they wanted to have a journalist who could write for the community in ways that the local paper would not. So she just wrote her first really long story that I saw today that’s the beginning of it. She’s been there about a month or so but just getting [into it]. And we’re trying to figure it out. It’s interesting because in the past, if we hired a journalist, we would hire the journalist and

the community would be stuck with them. But in this particular case, these three people who run this blog with Griff—they always get mad when I don't mention the three of them, so I have to mention Griff Wigley, Tracy Davis and Ross Currier, and they're really three very, very smart people, so we're really lucky. They wanted to have their own journalist. So now we're trying to work it out. Even when we hired her, she had to go and interview with these three people running the blog on the phone, and they all agreed that she was a great person for this. So now we're out there trying to do it. But for this thing to really work well, we would need a hundred of these. So then I could come to you and I could say, "Tom, you're interested in Civil War history," or whatever. I'd have to try and find, what topic would you pay \$2.00 a week for for a journalist?

TS: That's a good question.

LW: I know it is. It's a hard question for a lot of people because people are not used to, and that's why most people, when they heard this idea originally, just blew it off because they don't think anybody is going to pay for news. Well, they're not now because they get it for free. But when Howard Witt and that journalist who's covering the endangered species and, I don't know, I think it was 20,000 or 9,000, an enormous number of journalists' jobs have disappeared in the last year. When they're no longer doing it, you're not getting it for free any more. So what I say, you pay for a haircut. It costs you \$100 a year at least for a haircut. You're going to pay for news at some point.

TS: Maybe I would pay for reporting on historic preservation.

LW: Yes, see, so whatever it is. You pay your \$2.00, okay, and not only do you get your reporter, but you're also helping support ninety-nine other reporters. Then you can do your own little page, and we'll individualize it as much as we can. But your area is getting covered for sure. So that's the idea behind it; will people pay for anything? That's the big question. In fact, that's my research question of the year now because I've been saying this without doing a lot of research. I want to go out and find out how much people are paying right now in general for subscriptions and all. Most of the common knowledge is that people won't pay for news, but I'm not so sure of that.

TS: I'm just trying to think, the *Marietta Daily Journal*, nowadays they just do it automatically off my credit card. I think it is \$114 a year or something like that.

LW: Right, right, right. But we're never sure whether people are actually paying for the news. When I was in this business, if they didn't have the *Sunday Magazine*, we wouldn't get a call necessarily. But if they didn't have their coupons, that's where they would get called. So you're never sure if people are really paying for the news or the whole package or the experience of walking outside to get the paper, the ritual, you know. So those are some of the things that I want to research and just try and find out how much people might be willing to pay. Now there are models out there: there are public radio models, public television where people do. In Minnesota 97,000 people pay about \$100 each because they love Minnesota Public Radio so much that they're willing to put that money up. There are other places—Marketplace on public radio, a group of people from

around the North Carolina Research Triangle raised money for an innovation reporter. So people will pay for areas of interest.

TS: I was just thinking, public radio, they just about run you crazy those two or three times a year when they're doing their fundraising.

LW: Right. It's not going to work if we just throw an electronic newspaper up on their doorstep, basically; it's going to have to be a community. So, like you said, historical preservation. So the writer is part of the glue to keep that community together, but we're doing this already in Northfield. It doesn't even have to be a finished story sometime; it can be a part of a story. Then you probably know more than the reporter does when it comes to historical preservation.

TS: What's the name of Griff Wigley's blog?

LW: They have a blog called *Locally Grown*, and it's in Northfield, Minnesota: it is [locallygrownnorthfield.org](http://locallygrownnorthfield.org). I picked that because I knew Griff. I didn't want to try and go out and establish new relationships with people I didn't know. Eventually that might have to happen. So if this idea at one time sounded a little bizarre, it isn't any more because this newspaper thing, with so many people losing jobs. In October I've already been invited to three different conferences to talk about the idea, and all of them are about entrepreneur newspaper jobs. The latest one was the Society of Environmental Journalists. It's interesting because it's an experiment, and it might not come out the way I hoped it would or thought it would. But we're doing it, and we're going to see what happens. I'm much more involved in it than I thought. There are possibilities because Ruth Ann still likes this idea, and her husband is interested in giving money to Baruch College in New York, which is part of the City University of New York because that's where he graduated from. I don't know if I should even be mentioning this now, but there's a possibility that we will be working with Baruch, and they might re-grant us the capability to be like a little center so that we can do this thing more formally and see what happens. You got a scoop right there because nobody else knows that. I don't know, whether or not it's going to actually happen, but that's the conversation that we're having right now.

TS: Well, unlike your daily newspaper, by the time all of this goes online it's probably not going to be a scoop anymore.

LW: Well, maybe I'll have to update it then.

TS: Maybe so.

LW: So I think that kind of brings us up to where we are. It seems like I've talked an awful lot.

TS: No, this is great. Why don't we talk a little bit about, you've been here six years; how many classes do you teach a semester?

LW: If I told you that you'd want to reach over the table and probably try to kill me.

TS: No, no.

LW: I have a very light teaching load. I have one course a semester.

TS: So that was the deal when you came here.

LW: That was the deal when I came in.

TS: Just one class a semester.

LW: Yes, but the idea was that I would be doing what I do now. So in addition to all those other conferences, the last two years and this year too, I put on a conference called SoCon07 and SoCon08, where I partner with a couple of people in the community.

TS: Southern Conference? What does that stand for?

LW: I don't have a clue. I don't think anybody does. Somebody said, "Let's call it SoCon07." And we said, "Okay."

TS: Really? Nobody know what it means?

LW: Not really. It doesn't really have a meaning; it's just kind of like a name. It might have been Southern Conference, but if I say that, then those people from the Southern Conference will come after us. I think we were just kind of playing around, and somebody came up with those letters and said, "Let's just call it SoCon."

TS: Sounds like something the government would do—a bunch of bureaucrats.

LW: Yes, but these were PR people that I was with. So this is all about social media.

TS: Maybe it's social, social conference.

LW: Maybe that was it. I was there when they did it, and somebody said, "Let's just call it SoCon07." And we said, "Okay." But we didn't even try to think this is short for something else. So this is a conference that we held, and it was Jeff Haynie and Sherry Heyl. Sherry was running this little meeting, and we were both at an Atlanta Bloggers Association [Atlanta Media Bloggers], I think it was called. She said, "We should have a conference." And I said, "Well, if you're going to have one, let's do it at Kennesaw." Because I always wanted to be opportunistic if these things happen. So we developed it, the three of us, the first year. There was a dinner the night before at the Marietta Conference Center & Resort. We thought for the dinner maybe twenty-five people would come. Well, ninety people showed up for the dinner, and then the next day over two hundred came here to the Kennesaw campus. It was un-conference and semi-un-

conference, meaning that people could determine the topics that they wanted. It wasn't structured. There weren't a lot of talking heads. It wasn't big panels where people would come together. Well, people loved it. So then we did it in year two, last year, which was SoCon08. We had it down at Maggiano's in Atlanta, at Cumberland Mall, and we had to close it down with 160 people who came for the dinner, and almost 300 people came to the campus the next day. We're going to do it again this year.

My overall mission here was to work with the community and try to keep the idea of public journalism alive. It's interesting about public journalism because even though the name has faded, many of the people who were really in the forefront of it are in the forefront of this citizen journalism movement. My job at Minnesota Public Radio was kind of analog in that I was bringing people, physically, face to face. Now they have this thing called Public Insight Journalism where they have 13,000 people signed up who they e-mail to, and they're all involved in it. After I arrived at Kennesaw, I wrote a paper for the *National Civic Review* entitled, "Is Public Journalism Morphing into the Public's Journalism?" When I was practicing public journalism, the DNA was not right; it didn't have thumbs, you know what I mean? We knew we wanted to get this thing to happen, but we couldn't make it happen. Then along came all these things on the Internet and all these new tools. Suddenly, the DNA changed, and now it has thumbs. It doesn't matter any more whether journalists reach out to the public or not. It's a moot question because now the public has all of this special power, and that's what I look at too—all of this thing of trying to get journalists back to work. I think I was real interested in citizen journalism for awhile, but now I'm more interested in, not necessarily preserving journalism the way it was because maybe it needs to be reinvented, but to make sure that those important issues in our lives, sort of what Howard Witt was doing or the endangered species or all the great investigative journalism—the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is great at investigative journalism—if all of that stuff disappears, all those crooks are going to be feeding at the trough in ways that we never saw before.

TS: Okay, so back to where I was going with this, you're doing a lot of scholarship, a lot of service in this job, you teach one class a semester. What are the classes that you teach?

LW: I've been teaching a feature writing class. But two semesters I taught this class called the Marietta Experience. You can go and look at it; it was online.

TS: I think I went and talked to one of your classes once.

LW: You did. Even twice maybe we brought them over because you were telling them about the history of Marietta. So I taught that class twice, and half the students were communications students and half were visual arts students. My students went out in the community, collected information, and the visual arts students designed it. But I did two things when I did that class, I took them out and showed them official Marietta. We went and talked to the police department, and then the mayor's office and the city council were really good. They would put together panels for them. But then I had the students cover their own communities in groups. They were in small groups of four or five, and they went out and covered communities. The first year one was a Hispanic transition

neighborhood. One was the last day of the Clay homes [public housing project]. And one group decided to do the Town Square in Marietta. Before Clay homes were ripped down our kids in this class—they weren't kids necessarily—really documented what that was like, those last days. It's a little historical document and it's on the Internet at [mariettaexperience.com](http://mariettaexperience.com).

TS: Right. And they've built, I think, condos that they can't sell on that site.

LW: I like to ride my bicycle a lot, and I rode my bicycle through there the other day. They had like six condos, but it looked like about one-sixth of the whole thing was developed, and the rest was just sitting with grass growing.

TS: And I don't think they've sold a single one of them yet.

LW: Well, I wouldn't buy it at this stage. So there are several places around town that are like that. So that was a really good experience for my students. Afterwards, we put on a little reception for anybody who was in that first year. The mayor came up, and some of the Latino people came up, and I think we had a hundred people. It was really a big thing for the students. This was in the visual arts class. They all came in, and each computer screen had the Marietta Experience on it. These people just flowed into there, and they sat down and started reading the students' papers, their stories, and they loved them. One of the things that we wanted to do—when I came here we had media studies, and I've been pushing for the idea of a journalism program—and other people in the department too—but I wanted to make sure it had this citizen component to it. So this year, after two years of really working at it hard and pushing for it over all the years that I've been here, we now have a new concentration in the Communication department called Journalism and Citizen Media. All those students are going to take digital fundamentals. Dr. Heeman Kim is teaching video. Stephen "Jake" McNeill is teaching video also. Josh [Joshua N.] Azriel is teaching audio. The capstone for this new Journalism and Citizen Media is going to be that Marietta Experience. It's really called Multimedia Visions of Community, but it's built on that. But now we won't have the visual arts students. Our Communication students for this new age will have to develop their own websites and everything else. The idea behind it is that they will come in, and at the end of their three years or five years, whatever it takes to be a senior, they'll come in and showcase their work. That's the first thing they'll get graded on—show me two things that you're really good at—and then the students in that class will choose who they want on their teams based on this little showcase. We'll still take them to official spots, but then they'll have to pick their neighborhoods to cover. And not only that but based on the theory and research, they'll have to decide what kind of platform they want to use. It could be Internet, but they could do all their stories on mobile phones in the future. They'll have to explain why they're doing the stories, why they've decided to do it in print or why they've decided to do it visually. So it's pretty exciting, and hopefully they'll have a little portfolio. It'll take a couple of years to get it totally worked out.

TS: Well, have we talked about the things that you got the service award for, do you think?

LW: I think so. I've done four or five big conventions, national conventions during the period that I've been here. The blog is really service, I think, although it really helps me with the scholarship that I've done. I've never skirted on department stuff. I've been on I don't know how many search committees for new people—it seems like I spend my life reading through portfolios, hiring new people, and that's time consuming. Tenure and Promotion and all. I was on the search committee for Feland [L.] Meadows, who got the Goizueta Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education. So I think I've done a lot of those things, and it's kind of natural to what I enjoy doing anyhow. I don't like to tell people this, but I was the social chairman for Theta Chi at High Point College, and I think doing these conferences it's still somewhere in the back of my mind being a social chairman for conferences [laughter].

TS: Tell me a little bit about your impressions of Kennesaw. You've been here six years now. You never heard of us before six years ago. What's your impression about the intellectual life at Kennesaw, for instance, and has it changed any in the six years since you've been here?

LW: Okay, let me just start with coming down here. I had never heard of Kennesaw. One of the things that I think I'm a little proud about now, if you're in a journalism department anywhere around the country, you probably have heard of Kennesaw. I think I'm safe [in saying that]. I know so many people, so that's one good thing. But I came down here and was very, very pleasantly surprised by the school, maybe in the same way as when I showed up on the footlocker at High Point College all those years ago. The place was different than I expected it to be and entrepreneurial. That's what I really liked, that if you had an idea here—this was when Betty [L.] Siegel was here—if you had an idea you weren't discouraged, usually.

TS: She was an entrepreneurial president.

LW: Yes, and you weren't discouraged. If it was a good idea you could make it happen, sometimes slower than I like because this is academia and all. I think the other thing, the colleagues that are here, people like yourself and a lot of other people, are really honest to God scholars doing really good work in what had been like a teaching environment, and people didn't have to do as much scholarship, but they were doing it anyhow. And now, as we know, scholarship becomes more and more important. The new faculty that we've been hiring, they're really pretty super. When we go and interview people too, we're competing often with the Research 1's. I think our real strength is a lot of people who do research, but don't want to be in an R-1—Kennesaw now is becoming more and more appealing to them because research is still important, but it's not the end all and be all in all things. If they like to teach and they like to associate with students, you know . . . . Impressions are—when I arrived here it was a commuter college although even when it was a commuter college it didn't totally look like one.

TS: Well, '02 was the year we changed.

LW: Yes. Well, nobody's living on it though.

TS: No, they hadn't been built. I guess maybe they were under construction when you arrived for your interview.

LW: I don't think they were under construction when I got here.

TS: And then I guess they opened up in the fall of '02.

LW: Okay, I guess they were under construction then. So we went from zero students living on campus to about 3,500 now, somewhere in that range, and it's going to be . . . 5,000?

TS: I guess eventually. I don't know where they're going to put them.

LW: Yes. Well, were you there when the president said there's another ninety acres [we're about to acquire]?

TS: Yes, I had heard that they were trying to accumulate that [between I-75 and I-575].

LW: How many acres are here now on campus?

TS: Let's see, we started out with 152, and I think then when we got the thirty across Frey Road it became 180-something, but we've got 200-something now I think.

LW: So ninety acres would be substantial. That would be pretty big. But my overall impressions of Kennesaw, I'm really happy here. I wouldn't want to leave. I don't see myself even retiring for a long time. I'm really active in doing the things that I want to do, and I see real potential for setting up some sort of center, growing this. We were just interviewing people at the AEJMC for a new journalism job, and there were four or five people in there who I'd love to see come here out of the ones that we interviewed. Who knows, we'll probably have thirty or forty people apply for it. Of course, you've been here a lot longer; you've seen all the changes.

TS: I've been here for a few of them. But it's interesting, it's changing very rapidly now, I think, and it has been the last decade or so, although it has always been on an evolutionary course.

LW: Well, this is a real sign of growth. Today is the first day that I was not able to find a parking space for myself.

TS: Yes, you have to get here early if you want a parking space.

LW: I was looking around everywhere for a parking space. Usually I'd find something somewhere. I have to get a new strategy for finding parking spaces.

TS: You'll have to get here early.

LW: And the students, it's interesting; I think the students have even changed in the six years since I've been here.

TS: Because of the residence halls?

LW: I think the residence halls and the writing—everybody is always complaining about the writing's getting worse and worse, but in my class the writing seems to have gotten better.

TS: That's what I find in my classes.

LW: Really? And I think when I first arrived here I couldn't say that. I saw a lot weaker writing, but now overall, the writing is [better]. We ask them to do a different kind of writing too because they know in my class you can do well as long as you go out and do the reporting. If the writing isn't great, if you've gone out and gathered the facts and everything else, you're not going to hurt yourself in this class. But if you think you can write and not go out and gather any information and just be cute and write really well, you're in trouble, you're in deep trouble. So they have to go out and collect information and write that in a way that's appealing to readers. So I'm just kind of overjoyed with being at Kennesaw. I can't think of a better job anywhere.

TS: Fantastic.

LW: That's how my feeling is.

TS: Maybe that's a good way to end the interview.

LW: Excellent.

TS: Thank you.

LW: Well, thank you. This was fun.

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